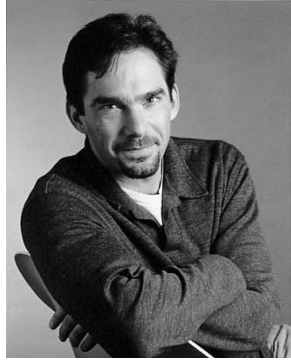


An Interview with Guest Curator Lawrence Rinder



To curate one of his first shows since returning to the West Coast in 2004 to become dean at California College of the Arts, Lawrence Rinder has returned, literally, to his roots. After a career of high-profile shows—assembled during stints as curator of contemporary art at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the founding director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, and curator of 20th-century art for the Berkeley Art Museum—Rinder’s latest exhibit is decidedly more personal.

“I was invited by the Judah L. Magnes Museum to design an exhibition based on their archive of my grandfather’s papers,” Rinder says. “I only met him once, when I was five, on the day he died, and I never even knew he had an archive. It seemed like a real opportunity to learn more about him.”

His grandfather, Reverend Reuben R. Rinder (1887-1966), was the cantor at Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco from 1915 to 1959. He devoted his life to Jewish liturgical music and brought new talent to the genre by commissioning important works for the temple by composers such as Ernest Bloch, Marc Lavry and Darius Milhaud.

As Lawrence Rinder perused the many letters, musical scores and photographs in his grandfather’s archive, he became enchanted by one group of documents in particular: They described the 1955 Festival of Faith, a celebration commemorating the United Nations’ 10th anniversary attended by 16,000 people at San Francisco’s Cow Palace. It was there the elder Rinder premeired his own musical arrangement of a traditional Ashkenazi melody accompanied by text from the ancient Jewish priestly benediction.

“My grandfather was a dedicated humanist, committed to building bridges to other faiths and other communities, and although I never knew him, I have always felt a strong connection to his liberal and ecumenical vision,” Rinder says. “This may be one reason why I was drawn to this particular prayer—which I recall hearing recited in the temple as a child—with its generous, embracing spirit.”

Rather than merely curating a display of archival documents for his exhibition at the Magnes, Lawrence decided to extend his grandfather’s work into the present by commissioning a multichannel sound installation building on the piece Reuben wrote for the Festival of Faith. Like his grandfather’s original arrangement, the new work includes the text from the priestly benediction, which translates as *May the Lord bless you and keep you/ May the Lord cause his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you/ May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

“When I began thinking about who to work with to set these words to music, I remembered an experience of hearing classical Persian vocal music that had given me the kind of profoundly aesthetic yet mystical sensation that my grandfather wrote about as being his aim in commissioning music for the Jewish liturgy,” Rinder recalls. He contacted Shahrokh Yadegari, one of the founders of the Persian Arts Society and Kereshmeh Records, organizations dedicated to the advancement and preservation of Persian traditional music, to dig up a few leads. He didn’t have to look far.

“In speaking with Shahrokh, I learned that he is an internationally recognized composer and performer of electronic music who has worked in the medium of sound installation,” Rinder says. “His own Iranian–Jewish background gave him some fascinating insights into the project, so I decided finally to invite him, along with Persian vocalist Siamak Shajarian, to work together to create a computer-assisted sound installation for the Magnes.”

In addition to the sound installation, the show, which is part of the Magnes Museum’s REVISIONS series, features a pair of visual objects, including an 18th–19th century brass bowl from Russia engraved with the priestly benediction, and a rotating selection of Persian miniatures.

REVISIONS *Shahrokh Yadegari: Through Music*, guest curated by Lawrence Rinder, runs from September 10, 2007, to July 6, 2008.

The Judah L. Magnes Museum is located at 2911 Russell Street in Berkeley. Hours are Sunday through Wednesday 11 am–4 pm and Thursday 11 am–8 pm. Suggested museum admission is \$6 for adults and \$4 for students and seniors. Visit the Magnes website at www.magnes.org or call 510.549.6950 for information about programs and exhibitions.

Image: Guest curator Lawrence Rinder. Photo by Robert Adler, courtesy California College of the Arts.